

Letter from Taizé

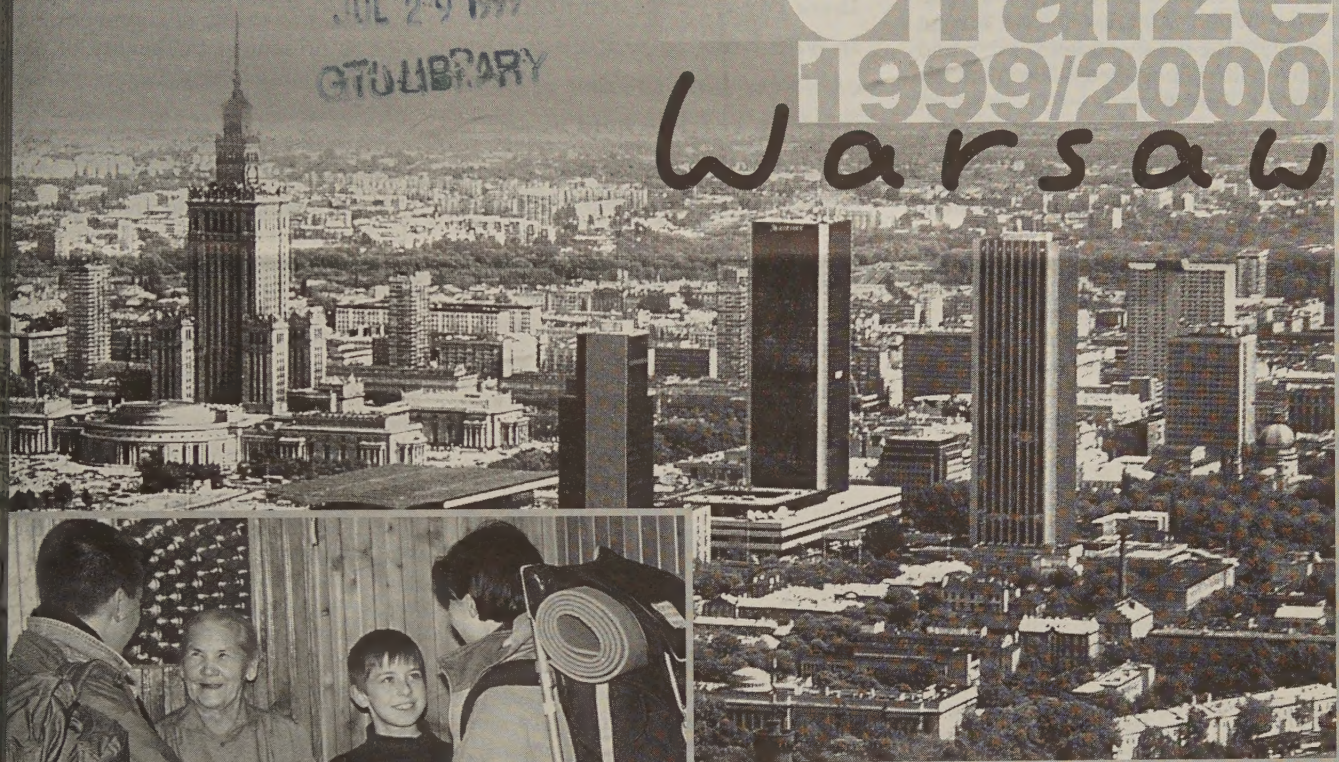
Bimonthly 3.50 FF 4 August – September 1999

**YOUNG ADULT
EUROPEAN MEETING**

28 December - 1 January

RECEIVED
JUL 29 1999
GTOLIBRARY

Taizé
1999/2000
Warsaw



**YOUNG ADULT EUROPEAN MEETING IN WARSAW
28 DECEMBER 1999 - 1 JANUARY 2000**

Paths of Reconciliation

Being pilgrims of trust: by bus or by train, coming from all the countries of Europe as well as from other continents, participants in the meeting will give a visible sign, a foreshadowing, of the trust with which they wish to begin the new millenium.

Welcoming pilgrims: this is very congenial for the Polish people, who are in the habit of going by tens of thousands on pilgrimage by foot, for example walking up to 400 kilometres each summer to reach the sanctuary of Czestochowa. Pilgrims are meant to be welcomed; they remind us that Christ constantly wishes to open up a road in our life and to gather us together as a people on the move.

During the two previous meetings in Poland, in the city of Wroclaw, all the participants marvelled at the quality of the welcome in families. It appears that the situation in Warsaw will be just as good; some three hundred parishes are opening their doors. The Polish people are offering a warm invitation to share for several days the life of their families, their parishes and their nation.



Setting out to take part in this meeting means expressing our desire to open a way of reconciliation in the human family by the lives we live. Sharing and living with young people from many different backgrounds is a way of changing our outlook, of being more attentive to what each person has to contribute, to the experiences of those who are seeking a different future for their nations.

Each day, times of prayer will bring together all the participants and enable us to draw from the wellsprings of communion in God, to let Christ and the Gospel illuminate our lives. Prayers will also take place in the parishes, followed by times of small-group sharing and, where possible, times of listening to residents of Warsaw who are working to help others. These times of searching that give each person the opportunity to express themselves, and the welcome in families, will offer everyone the possibility of deepening contacts and of understanding better what really matters for others and for themselves.

WHAT ARE THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF WARSAW HOPING FOR?

What are they looking for? What is happening in parishes and groups? As everywhere, there is such diversity that it is impossible to express the essential in a few words. What is striking after the preliminary preparation meetings is how eager they are to offer hospitality to others in their turn: "We have waited so long to be able to welcome others, and now we are impatient to see those who will come as friends whom we have not yet met."

Each year, more and more young Poles travel outside their land, and now they are very happy to have others discover life in their country, and especially the rich life of their Church. This dynamism of the Church in Poland is particularly visible in the parishes that have been created in the large new districts of the cities. In May, a meeting was held in the north of Warsaw, with a hundred young people and adults who met first for a time of prayer in their new church, inaugurated the day before to replace a temporary wooden chapel. One of the young people explained the life of their group:

We are witnessing rapid changes in society and in our way of life. Each day advertisements proclaim the opening of a new store or a new product, and the city of Warsaw is changing quickly, with more and more skyscrapers. In this context, there could be the temptation to withdraw, to protect ourselves from the rest of the world in order to hold on to our faith. But we can also benefit from the experience of the previous generation, which was able to deepen its understanding of faith in a hostile context while reflecting on ways to transform society and to create the basis for a more human world.



"We meet in our youth community once a week to pray and to get new energy by sharing with one another. Praying and reflecting on the Word of God are an important basis for our life and our commitments. We need this rootedness in prayer, which keeps us from quarrels and divisions. In our community, many of us like to sing. So we add beauty to the Sunday liturgy by singing and playing instruments. It is not only the young people who take part in this, but children as well.

"As we become aware of the need to deepen our own faith, we also want to prepare the youth of our parish for the sacrament of confirmation. Many of us have taken the time to learn how to lead these groups, and in this way we support one another and we are discovering how to deepen a sense of community in parish life.

"Most of our activities take place during the summer, with a series of meetings or retreats lasting a week or two for different age-groups. For some people



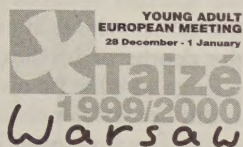
who need activity, sports can be a way of keeping a contact, so we propose a bicycle trip as a way of opening other realities up to them, of discovering how God is present in the beauty of nature and in other persons."

RAPID CHANGES IN POLISH SOCIETY

Some young people are hoping that the European meeting will help to reinforce the sense of community in parish life, to help people go towards others. Someone deeply committed in the life of the Church expressed his question: "Those who visit us are always surprised by the first image they have of the life of the Church in Poland. The churches are full on Sunday and even sometimes during the week; millions of believers come together when the Pope comes on pilgrimage; there are many young priests; churches are still being built. And yet we realize that together we have to learn how to see the parish as a community and not just as a sacred building. Since we are fortunate that so many people still come to church, we have to help them grow in faith. We can always find people willing to help where necessary, and there is a lot of generosity, but we need to go further. Everyone has to feel that he or she is accompanied on their life-journey, that they have with them pastors who can help them to find their place, to assume their responsibilities."

Warsaw is a big university town and there are many students in different parishes. They are more aware of current changes. One of them writes, "We are witnessing rapid changes in society and in our way of life. Each day advertisements proclaim the opening of a new store or a new product, and the city of Warsaw is changing quickly, with more and more skyscrapers. In this context, there could be the temptation to withdraw, to protect ourselves from the rest of the world in order to hold on to our faith. But we can also benefit from the experience of the previous generation, which was able to deepen its understanding of faith in a hostile context while reflecting on ways to transform society and to create the basis for a more human world. This is also our concern now, and it leads us to see our studies as more than just a way to have a successful career."

At the time of the iron curtain, our great desire was to meet them because they stimulated us in the search for freedom. Now that we have to build a new Europe, we need to be together. We have to realize that Warsaw is not in the East, but at the heart of Europe."



WARSAW, AT THE HEART OF EUROPE

Already young people from other countries are thinking about what it will mean to go to Warsaw. For some young Germans, it will be the discovery of a country that is next door and yet not well known. In one of the groups in Taizé someone said, "I heard my friends talking about the warm welcome of the Polish people, or the meeting in Wrocław, but I never had the opportunity to go there. I sense that there is an invisible fence that separates us from the Poles, a fence within people. Soon we will be in the same European Community, and we often see Polish people in Germany, but we make little effort to go towards them. At the time of the iron curtain, our great desire was to meet them because they stimulated us in the search for freedom. Now that we have to build a new Europe, we need to be together. We have to realize that Warsaw is not in the East, but at the heart of Europe."

For a young man from the north of France, the distance is even greater: "When I start to talk about Warsaw, my friends look at the map and realize it is no further away than the south of Italy. The distance is psychological. And yet there are many families of Polish origin here who came in the past to work in the mines. Thinking too of the large numbers of Poles who come to Taizé, or even of the Russians and those from the Baltic countries, I say to myself that we too can make the journey in the other direction. We know better now that in order to build something that lasts, we cannot look for the easy way out. I think that, in fact, after a first reaction of surprise, my friends understand that going to Warsaw will be a good way to begin the new millennium."



PREPARING FOR THE EUROPEAN MEETING

How can we set out as pilgrims? What can we do so that the sign of reconciliation we live out together will not be detached from our ordinary life? By searching for answers to these questions, the preparation for the meeting in each place will be a way of going forward together with many others. It will be a kind of anticipation of the meeting itself. In many regions, from Portugal to the Baltic countries, from Ireland to Romania, regular gatherings for prayer and sharing will be held. Some questions can help us reflect:

- What encourages me to set out on a pilgrimage? What holds me back?
- How can I begin to put reconciliation into practice where I live?
- How can I listen more to Christ? What helps me to realize that he is already with me, that he goes before me?
- There must be others who would be interested in beginning the year 2000 in this unique manner. How can we invite them to join us?
- Taking part in this pilgrimage means also sharing what I have discovered with others, especially when I return home. How can I look for ways of maintaining and deepening links with different groups and local Christian communities?

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PRactical DETAILS

Arrival: Tuesday morning, 28 December 1999 between 7am and 12 noon. **Departure:** Saturday late afternoon, 1 January 2000

General programme: Participants will be welcomed by families and local church communities throughout the city and surrounding region. Morning prayer each day will be in one of the churches of the neighbourhood where you are staying. Then meetings in small groups with other participants and with local people. Each day—midday and evening—there will be two common prayers for all participants of the meeting together. In the afternoon, workshops on various themes.

Accommodation: with families, but often in simple conditions. It is essential to bring a sleeping-bag and camping mat.

17 to 29 year olds:

— those who arrive on 28th December choose one of two ways of taking part:

- participation in the life of parishes of the city (this is the main group);
- helping in a team that has a practical responsibility (meal distribution, church team, choir group), while still participating in the life of a parish.

those who can help, as animators in parishes or as team-leaders for practical tasks, or in the choir group, need to arrive on Sunday 26th December, between 8am and 3pm (arrival not possible on 27th December).

16 year olds may come to the meeting only if accompanied by an adult over 18, with each adult accompanying no more than two 16 year olds so as to stay in the same family with them. Arrival: 28th December—not before. All take part in the main group during the meeting: "participation in the life of parishes of the city".

Adults over 30: the European Meeting is intended for young adults under 30; however a few adults over this age can also come, in particular if they are leading groups of young adults. We ask older adults (over 45) to consider sponsoring a young person to come from a church, chaplaincy or school in their area, instead of coming themselves. Adults over 30 all participate in the main group, and arrive on 28th December (not before). If you cannot accept the same simple accommodation conditions as the young people and need a "real bed," please indicate this when you register.

Families with children, and people with a disability who need special accommodation should contact Taizé—best by telephone in October or November—to arrange this.

Contribution to costs: The level of contribution for young people from Ireland and Britain will be approximately £40 for the whole meeting. As well as the hire of meeting-halls and equipment, this covers all meals and a public transport pass.

Travel: there will be special coaches from the UK to the meeting. Contact Taizé for details.

Register for the meeting Taizé by 1st December at the latest.

Further information will be sent in November to those who register earlier.

To respond to Christ's call and become his disciple, do we have to leave everything behind?

In the days of Jesus, young people who wanted to make progress in their spiritual life were in the habit of leaving their own homes to go and live with a teacher. There they would study the Scriptures and learn prayers and rites by practicing them. At the same time, they helped their teacher in the profession by which he earned his living. The two young men who asked Jesus, "Teacher, where do you live?" (John 1,38), were probably intending to go and live with him in order to share his life and learn from him. Usually, however, Jesus himself chose and called the disciples he wanted. He would be walking beside the lake, or in front of a tax-collector's table, and call a fisherman or an official to come with him. The Gospel tells us that when he called, "they left everything and followed him" (Luke 5,11).

Unlike other teachers at that time, Jesus had no fixed residence. He was often on the road. After he left Nazareth he did not have any regular income or permanent employment. Following him, sharing his life to receive his teaching, therefore meant living in the same way. Jesus warned those who were considering it: "Whoever does not give up all their possessions cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14,33). We would like to know the exact circumstances when Jesus spoke these words. Was he replying to a question? A phrase spoken by Peter shows us that some people took him literally: "We have left everything and followed you" (Luke 18,28).

But a few verses later, the same gospel speaks of a visit made by Jesus to Zacchaeus, "who was wealthy". Welcoming Jesus into his home with joy, that man decided to give away half of his possessions and repay those he had defrauded. And Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19,9).

What should we do when Christ seems to be calling us but we are not sure that we can respond?

This question has been asked from the very first day when Jesus began to call people to follow him. A rich young man, who was invited to give his possessions to the poor and follow Jesus, hesitated. He did not know whether he could manage to do it. Finally he went away. His sadness shows that he did not do what he wanted to in the depths of his heart. He suffered because he was unable to let go of what he owned and follow Christ. What to do? Jesus did not try to persuade him. He let him go. He was sad when he saw how great possessions can keep a human heart captive. But he did not give in to discouragement. God will make possible what human beings cannot accomplish (Mark 10,17-27).

At other moments, too, Jesus did not try to hold on to those who were not ready to be his companions (John 6,66-69). He did not ask for the impossible. He did not force anyone. But he discerned in those who came to encounter him the working of the Holy Spirit, the secret activity of God: "All those whom the Father gives me will come to me" (John 6,37). The first step is to let God awaken within ourselves a beginning of confidence and trust. This seed of trust will sprout and grow, often without our even realizing it, until the day when it allows us to take a first step towards the vocation we have glimpsed.

As we walk along this road there will be difficult times, and even failures. But the most decisive moments are often those when our own strength is no longer sufficient to allow us to go forward. There is a Gospel story which is very eloquent in this regard. One night, Christ came to his disciples by walking on the water. Peter recognized him and dared to leave the boat to walk towards him. But he quickly became afraid and began to sink. Then he discovered that what mattered was not his courage

Two Questions About Christ's Call

There is no reason to assume that Zacchaeus left his family. The salvation which Christ brings is for all, not just for those who followed him on the roads of Galilee. He had friends in Judea—Martha, Mary and Lazarus—with whom he liked to stay (John 11). And the Acts of the Apostles makes positive mention of Christians who are well-off, for example Lydia, a merchant who opened her home to the apostles and held the meetings of the local Christian community there (Acts 16). Then there were Priscilla and Aquila, a couple who welcomed Paul into their home and offered him work making tents so that he could earn his living in the way to which he was accustomed (Acts 18). The New Testament draws a quite varied picture of the Christian life. Following Christ does not mean obeying a commandment. No law requires us to imitate his life. Those who consent to live in poverty and to make themselves totally available to Jesus do so as a free choice made out of love.

age or his fear, but the fact that he could always call out to Christ, who was already reaching out his hand to save him (Matthew 14,22-33).

Joining Christ who carries his cross and gives his life for love, sharing in his death and resurrection, is just as impossible for us as walking on water. Who could go to the point of giving their life by their own efforts? But it is when the road becomes impassable that we "know Christ and the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3,10). Saint Paul says this in another place when he writes, "It is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12,10).

Where should we begin when we do not know what to do? Perhaps by waiting in silence and peace for some words from the Lord. Mary heard these words: "Rejoice, O highly favoured one!" By the Holy Spirit, Christ says to us today, "Rejoice, for if you are thinking about my call, then my grace has already touched your life!"

These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

5 SUN Jesus said: When two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.
6 Mon We can reassure our hearts before God, whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.

7 Tue The Lord says: As the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before they have watered the earth and made it fertile, so is it with the word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me before it has achieved its purpose.

8 Wed The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means "God-with-us".

9 Thu Jesus said: Whoever listens to my words and puts them into practice is like someone who built their house on rock.

10 Fri Paul writes: The mystery of Christ is that all peoples now share the same inheritance, being members of one body, and having received the same promise in Christ Jesus, through the Gospel.

11 Sat Isaiah said: On that day there shall be no more hurt or violence, for the land will be filled with the knowledge of God as the water covers the bottom of the sea.

12 SUN Peter asked Jesus: "How many times should I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

13 Mon In God's days justice will flourish, and peace in plenty until the end of time. For the Lord rescues the needy who call to him, and the poor who have no one to help.

14 Tue God's love for us has been shown in this way: God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him.

15 Wed Jesus said to Pilate: For this I was born, and for this I came into the world: to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

16 Thu God chose us in Christ, before the world was made, to be holy and faultless before him in love.

17 Fri God said to Jeremiah: Go to everyone I send you to. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you.

18 Sat All the commandments can be summed up in this: Love your neighbour as yourself.

19 SUN Paul writes: Now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For me, to live is Christ.

20 Mon Jesus said: Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

21 Tue ST MATTHEW As he walked, Jesus saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me". And he got up and followed him.

22 Wed Give yourselves to God and then sin will no longer have any power over you — you are not under law, but under grace.

23 Thu Our hope will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

24 Fri Moses said to the people: The Lord our God is the only God. Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.

25 Sat This is love: that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son for the forgiveness of our sins.

26 SUN Jesus said: A father said to his two sons, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The first replied, "I will not," but afterwards thought better of it and went. The second replied, "Certainly, sir," but did not go. Which of the two did the father's will? Those listening said, "The first."

27 Mon The Lord says: I will cure my people of their disloyalty, I shall love them with all my heart. I hear them and watch over them.

28 Tue Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

29 Wed Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah: My servant will not quarrel or cry out, he will not snuff out the smouldering wick. All the nations will put their hope in him.

30 Thu Peter writes: Above all, love each other deeply, because love wipes away many a sin.

SEPTEMBER

MEDITATING ON THE WORD

These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

3 SUN Jesus said: Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing and we marvel at it?"

4 Mon Even if I can understand all mysteries and know all things, even if I have the faith to move mountains, if I am without love I am nothing.

5 Tue We do not know how to pray properly, but the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

6 Wed Jesus said: If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, they will certainly not lose their reward.

7 Thu Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch." "Master," Simon replied, "we have worked hard all night long without catching anything, but because you say so I will let down the nets."

8 Fri Watch over those who are entrusted to you, not simply as a duty but willingly and with gladness of heart, according to God's will.

9 Sat Just as each of us has one body with many parts, and the parts do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body, and each of us belongs to all the others.

1 Fri Jesus said: The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

2 Sat God is better than a fortress in time of trouble. He recognizes those who trust in him, even when the flood rushes on.

10 SUN On that day, it will be said: Look, this is our God; we put our hope in him and he saved us. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

11 Mon The Lord rescued me from enemies who were stronger than I am and set me in the open.

12 Tue By faith, Abraham answered God's call and set out for the land he was to inherit. And he set out without knowing where he was going.

13 Wed Paul writes: Draw your strength from the grace which is in Christ Jesus.

14 Thu James writes: Those who listen to the word of God but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like.

15 Fri May God fulfill every good purpose of yours by his power and complete all that you have been doing by faith.

16 Sat Let your heart remain constant in the adoration of God; for there is a future and your hope will not come to nothing.

17 SUN Paul writes to the Thessalonians: We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

18 Mon St LUKE Jesus sent out his disciples saying: Whenever you go into a town where they make you welcome, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there and say, "The kingdom of God is very near you."

19 Tue I said: Here I am, I have come, and as it is written, I desire to do your will, my God. Your law is deep within my heart.

20 Wed Jesus said: I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.

21 Thu Paul writes: You did not receive a spirit which makes you a slave to fear again; you received the spirit of adoption by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

22 Fri The Lord says to his servant: I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and shape you. I will make you a light to the nations.

23 Sat St Paul writes: We should not try to please ourselves, but consider what is good for our neighbours and so build up community.

24 SUN Jesus said: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is similar: Love your neighbour as yourself.

25 Mon Paul writes: Live in joyfulness. Encourage one another. Be of one mind and live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

26 Tue Jeremiah said: The word of the Lord has brought insult and derision upon me. And so I said to myself, "I shall not think about him, I shall no longer speak in his name." But there seemed to be a burning fire in my heart, which I could not contain.

27 Wed Turn to God who will forgive freely. For, thus says the Lord, my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.

28 Thu Paul explained his ministry, saying: We do not want to be masters of your faith, but fellow workers with you for your joy.

29 Fri Bless the Lord, my soul; let all that is in me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, my soul; forget none of his good deeds.

30 Sat Jesus said: You are the light of the world. Let your light shine in people's sight, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

31 SUN Jesus said: The greatest among you will be your servant.

OCTOBER

MEDITATING ON THE WORD

To prune, cut, burn... It is rare to hear such harsh words on the lips of Jesus, and they could frighten us. What is going to happen to me? Must I cut off or destroy a part of myself?

Sometimes we see branches that bear fruit and others which remain sterile existing side by side in us. We see other people rejoice with us about one gift of ours that is developing, and yet other branches would like to grow too.

The first verse provides the key for the whole passage: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser" (John 15,1-8). If we are the branches, then Christ is the trunk, the solid part which remains, which sinks its roots deep into the earth and keeps nothing for itself. The main thing is receiving the strength and vitality from Christ. Why does the plant have to be pruned? Because the branch can only bear fruit if the sap is not spread out too thinly along the branches which have grown too long during the previous summer. When spring begins the branch seems thin and weak, but the vinedresser was vigilant; he chose the branch that could best bear fruit for that season. Each year, the same operation takes place so that the fruit can mature under the best possible conditions.

If we look closely, we see that not many other plants give as good an image of overflowing life given by the roots, even on poor soil. And so we understand the conclusion of the parable better: "My Father's glory is that you bear much fruit" (John 15,8).

- Have I already discovered the overflowing life which Christ gives?
- Have I had the experience that I am not always the one who can best choose the branch that will bear fruit?
- What does it mean to trust that the weak branch will receive all the necessary strength?

Believing in God means knowing that he is present in all the events of human life. That was the great intuition of the prophet Isaiah: God's plans go beyond all the barriers that human beings can set up. True wisdom, then, enables us to discern, in the midst of our history, the unsettling presence of a God "who exercises steadfast love, uprightness and justice on earth" (Jeremiah 9,23). And this wisdom is basically a gift, since only God knows what he intends to do.

But human beings often forget this essential truth, enclosing God in a separate domain of life and preferring to trust in their own skills. Isaiah himself had to deal with such an attitude. With easy access to the court, he was distressed to see the royal counselors, in times of political crisis, act according to purely human criteria, as if everything could be decided by relations of power, by working out the most efficient strategies. Religion then became a mere façade, a question of empty rites and customs detached from real life.

The prophet, for his part, saw a way out of the crisis above all by a return to the Lord and by trust in him. "In returning and quiet lies your salvation, in serenity and trust lies your strength" (Isaiah 30,15). Otherwise, the new things God would do would turn the life of the nation upside down. For those who remained attached to their own view of things, the "prodigies" and "wonders" Isaiah predicted would not be pleasant at all, but come to shake up their comfortable lives. Such events are in fact, however, a sign of God's goodness, because they offer people a possibility of entering into God's outlook and understanding the salvation he constantly offers. Such a change in our way of seeing, which is certainly not easy to attain, is the gateway to true wisdom, the discovery of a God who knocks on our door even (or especially) in times of crisis to open a road where everything seemed hopeless.

- Is there a gap in me between my faith in God and the actual life I live? What role does my faith play in times of personal or collective crisis?
- Have I ever been able to view something unanticipated that happened to me as an invitation to broaden my vision, as the possibility for a new beginning?

Johannine hours are meant as a way of seeking God in silence and prayer in the midst of our daily life. During the course of a day, take an hour or so to read the Bible passage with the short commentary and to reflect on the questions which follow. Afterwards, a group of 3 to 10 people can meet to share what they have discovered and perhaps for a time of prayer.

Milan

Going Beyond Our Fears

The experience of the European meeting remains alive in the hearts of the people of Milan. Regular prayers are continuing in very many parishes of the city. During these weeks many of them have been organizing assistance to refugees from Kosovo. Quite a few families have stayed in touch with the young people they welcomed during the meeting. Some are writing to tell what has changed for them, like this woman:

They are gone now, Michel, Antoine and Jean, three of the thousands of young people who invaded Milan for five days. They left behind them a feeling of emptiness, taking away a piece of my life and leaving me in exchange memories, emotions and experiences that were unexpected, perhaps undesired, but certainly important.

Mario and I had expressed our willingness to offer hospitality to two young

people, and in my heart I hoped they would be two girls from Eastern Europe, perhaps from Albania or Bosnia, which would have given me the opportunity to become more familiar with those countries, which today are awakening so many questions in us Italians. We gave up part of our holidays and that made us feel very virtuous and generous.

The day before the meeting, the organizers told us we would probably get three Poles. No problem. I dusted off my English grammar, untouched for over twenty years. I felt good about it; it was like a sign of renewal. The evening of the arrival day the phone rang: "Is it ok if we send you three young people from France instead of Poland?" Of course. It won't be as exotic, but still interesting. "We thought of you because you live near the parish, and one of the boys is handicapped...seriously." "Seriously?" "Well, he can't walk, can't talk, is in a wheelchair. Is that ok?" Naturally (how to say no?).

But inside myself, I had it out with God. "You know I have no experience of this, I don't know how to deal with it!

What do you want from me?" When Michel arrived in his wheelchair, with his incontrollable movements, his difficulties with eating and speaking, it was the first time a handicapped person ever entered my home. Seeing the care and attention showed him by Antoine and Jean, I felt the need to understand where they found the strength. In prayer? I decided then to go with them to one of the prayers in the Fiera. Perhaps I would find something important there, something to shake me out of my rigidity.

In one of the immense halls, I found myself amidst 20,000 young people sitting on the floor. What struck me most was the silence of this huge crowd of different races, cultures, customs and backgrounds. How could something like this be possible were it not for a mysterious Presence? I reflected, meditated, prayed, tried to understand. When I returned the following day, the participants seemed even more numerous and more concentrated. Perhaps, like me, they were all looking for something. The prayer included all peoples, all forms of suffering, all the victims of war.

Back home, we spent the evenings with our three guests. One evening, Michel drank a hot cup of coffee and threw back his head in a gesture I could now interpret as a thank-you and I smiled at him. Then he indicated that he wanted to ask a question. Syllable by syllable, with the help of Antoine, he asked, "How far have the Italian schools come with the integration of the disabled?" I was dumbstruck. He was the one who had the strength and the tenacity to express himself in this way, to increase his knowledge of others, to understand what is happening elsewhere. He was the one who could help me survive in a world based on consumer-values and efficiency; he could help me break through the crust of intolerance and indifference that still suffocated my conscience.

On New Year's Eve, we went together to the prayer and then to the "festival of nations." My husband helped Antoine to bring Michel into the parish hall (the adaptation of our parish buildings to make them accessible to the disabled is still to come!). Jean was ill and stayed home. I spent a lot of time with Michel. I brought him the piece of panettone offered by the parish and found him momentarily by himself. Antoine had gone to watch the folk dancing. Michel looked at me, smiled and threw back his head in a gesture that I now knew how to interpret: he wanted to eat the cake. I put a piece in his mouth. Piece by piece we ate our panettone together. It may very well have been my first real Communion....

Albania

A choice of hope

These past few months, Taizé brothers went to several Balkan countries, praying with those who are suffering from the war. One of them went to Albania and wrote:

In the visits I made I was always with young Albanians and, in general, we attempted first to contact the local Catholic relief services, or the parish. Visiting refugee camps in Tirana, Dures, Lushnje, Kucova and Skutari, what struck me, besides the suffering which you can never get used to, was the great dignity of the refugees. When we entered a camp, someone always came to greet us and to thank us for the visit. In one camp, when we arrived they invited us to sit down and they offered us some tea!

In many camps, the refugees have chosen a leader to act as intermediary between the different relief organizations or with the town, to keep up the list of families and new arrivals, and to explain the needs of the camp. Often the refugees themselves help to unload the lorries and



Echoes from the Contients

distribute the food and clothing. In some places schoolteachers from Kosovo have begun to organize makeshift schools for the children; in other places Albanian teachers or young people come a few hours a day to teach as volunteers. Where possible, the children are sent to local schools.

I was told generally that aid is arriving, even if it is not always what they need most (tons of pasta came from Italy, although the Kosovars do not eat pasta!). The Catholic relief services try to purchase as much as possible in Albania or to work with Albanian companies, in order to help the local economy. There are many volunteers from other countries, even if usually they only stay a few weeks.

It is beautiful to see how many Albanian families are making a great effort to welcome refugees into their homes. Albanian homes are generally small and Kosovar families are large, and they do not want to split up, which is understandable.

I made an interesting visit to the archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church. He is not in an easy position. Some people want to turn the war into a conflict between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. So this bishop, like the Catholic bishop of Tirana, is doing all he can to make people understand that it is not a "religious war".

I met with young people from different cities, helping them to prepare for their visit to Taizé this summer. As one of them said, it will be an opportunity better to realize and to share what they have been going through these months in such an intense way.

The strong commitment of many young

Albanians needs to be emphasized. Tirana, for instance, young people who had been to Taizé last summer as well as to Milan for the European meeting go to two camps every afternoon to help organize activities and to play with the children. Others go every day to prepare meals to distribute the meals, others to visit families, still others to do the translations that are constantly needed. Regular prayers which started six years ago are continuing in several cities.

It should also be mentioned that, in addition to helping the refugees, the young Albanians are working with the poorest people of their own country. In Dures, young people help children from high-risk families with their schoolwork in the afternoon. In Tirana a young woman has begun gathering together street children to help them wash themselves, to give them something to eat and to teach them to read and write. Others go to visit prisoners each week, and so on.

They all asked us to continue to pray for peace. They were happy to hear that in Taizé after Easter we began to pray night and day for this. We want to keep choosing to hope, to believe that peace and justice are possible, to trust the intentions of the young for their peoples. During the European meeting in Milan, young Serbians were welcomed in the same parishes as young Albanians, a small sign that trust among peoples is in fact possible.

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